

THE GOVERNMENT has made good progress in tackling child poverty in its first two terms in office, successfully reducing the number of families living below the poverty line by 15 per cent (which represents over half a million children) between 1998 and 2003. Although the most recent figures from the *Households Below Average Income* study show a disappointing slow-down in this rate of progress, the achievements of the Government's anti-poverty strategy thus far remain impressive.

The Government will face considerable difficulties, however, in sustaining progress in its third term. In part this is due to the sheer scale of poverty and inequality that remains, which is too great for existing public policies alone to surmount. Political decision makers will need to devise new policy instruments to break the vicious cycle whereby poverty in childhood is the forerunner of poor health and education and other key outcomes in adulthood. The task will become more difficult in the future, not least because people suffering from multiple and severe disadvantage will be particularly hard to reach.

However, there is another group which will prove just as hard to reach – the broader public. Public opinion is crucial because it is impossible to see how the Government can sustain political momentum for its anti-poverty strategy unless it mobilises popular support for a more radically progressive – and by implication, more costly – policy programme.

It is significant in this regard that the Government's successes so far have been achieved through a package of largely hidden or under-publicised measures – a covert operation that has been labelled 'redistribution by stealth'. There is now growing recognition that the long-term targets can only be met through an open and upfront approach to tackling poverty and inequality in Britain.

The need to mobilise public support has prompted calls for the Government to go public with its vision of a society in which poverty has been removed – though it is noticeable that those calls were not generally heeded in the general election campaign of 2005. Standing on a platform of economic competence, the issue of tackling poverty and disadvantage was almost entirely absent from the Labour Party's public political campaign.

If the Government appears unduly cautious, its hesitance is presumably attributable to doubts about voters' appetite for more open redistribution. Certainly, attitudinal surveys provide some grounds for scepticism about the depth of public support for higher spending: surveys show that while a significant number of people are prepared to accept the principle of reducing income inequality in theory,¹ they are less inclined to part with the cash in reality.² Politicians can be forgiven for assuming that professed support for a more progressive system is superficial, therefore, and will tend to evaporate once the implications for voters' personal finances are made clear.

There are, then, obvious political reasons why the Government has been reluctant to portray itself avowedly as the party of the 'poor' and disadvantaged, since to do so risks alienating the middle-income, middle-class voters who now form the backbone of its electoral constituency.



Making the public case for tackling poverty and inequality

New research has found that many people are unaware, misinformed or sceptical of the reality of poverty in the UK, and of the Government's pledge eradicate child poverty by 2020. Here Louise Bamfield argues that the Government needs to engage greater public support for this goal, as much more investment is needed to achieve it. Investing in quality of life and improving life chances must be argued as both morally right and, in the bigger picture, beneficial to society as a whole.

Nevertheless, it can still be seen to deserve criticism for failing to seize the initiative and show firm political leadership in tackling poverty by forging wider public consensus for a more visionary approach. In Ruth Lister's words, the Government has tended to 'woo rather than lead' public opinion in this area, sometimes using language that seems to reinforce existing negative stereotypes of 'poor' people rather than challenging them.³ If the Government is serious about meeting its child poverty targets, it will need to know more about the values and beliefs that underpin public attitudes towards poverty, as well as exploring the persuasiveness of the case for tackling poverty among the 'non-poor' public.

The analysis below examines some of the problems that arise in making the public case for eradicating poverty. It draws on findings of original qualitative research conducted by MORI on behalf of the Fabian Commission on Life Chances and Child Poverty, which was designed to explore the current views and beliefs about poverty of middle-class and middle-income groups (people in the political centre ground, drawn from social classes B, C1 and C2), and also to investigate what types of political arguments are likely to be most effective in persuading people of the need for government action.⁴

The low visibility of poverty in the UK. A significant gap exists between people's perception of the problem and the actual prevalence of poverty. By European standards the UK public is uniquely misinformed about the extent of poverty in the UK. Evidence from the Eurobarometer surveys, conducted simultaneously in countries across Europe, shows that the UK stands out as having far lower levels of visibility of poverty – as measured by the visibility of poverty in people's neighbourhood or local area – than the actual (high) incidence of poverty would suggest. In 2001, visibility of poverty among UK citizens was lower than in many countries including the Netherlands, Belgium and France, all of which have significantly *lower* rates of poverty than the UK; while in 1989, the visibility of poverty was lower in the UK than in any other country in Europe.

Comparative evidence also shows that members of the British public are much more likely than their European counterparts to believe that poverty is caused by behavioural factors – a finding which helps explain the strength of negative stereotypes of the poor in this country. A great many people still need to be convinced both of the existence of a problem and that the Government can effectively address it.

In accordance with these findings, the Fabian Commission/MORI research found that many people are sceptical about the existence of real poverty in Britain today, and find it hard to believe that poverty exists in the midst of our affluent society. There was active resistance to the phenomenon of 'income poverty', as participants struggled to agree on what child poverty could really mean in an apparently affluent country such as the UK. This scepticism about poverty in contemporary Britain owes much to its association with the condition of starving children in Africa. Poverty 'at home' in the UK, by contrast, was more strongly associated with forms of *emotional neglect* than with material hardship and deprivation. There was also widespread ignorance of the existence of *in-work poverty* and of the difficulties in making ends meet even when people are working.

The media and negative stereotypes. Misperceptions of the behaviour of 'poor' people are commonplace, the product perhaps of news media that constantly deny the reality of poverty and of a popular culture that typically portrays people on low incomes as grotesque caricatures. As a CPAG book, *Poverty first hand: Poor people speak for themselves*, details, numerous instances can be found of negative stereotyping of 'poor' people in the press, where they are portrayed as lacking initiative and budgeting skills, as fraudulent 'professional' beggars, as single mothers who contrive to become pregnant only to 'jump the housing list', and as members of an 'underclass' characterised by 'drugs, casual violence, petty crime, illegitimate children, homelessness, work avoidance and contempt for conventional values'.⁵

The Fabian Commission/MORI research found that people's attitudes towards poverty are often distorted by the picture of the world they see portrayed on TV. In expressing their doubts about the existence of 'real' poverty, participants made frequent reference to so-called 'reality' TV shows such as *Wife Swap* to back up their claims that unemployed people are able to enjoy a comfortable, even luxurious, lifestyle on benefits at the expense of the taxpayer. Another prevalent view was that 'hard up' parents are feckless and irresponsible, wasting their money on drinking and gambling – on 'dog-racing and scratch cards'. Above all, the deliberative workshop revealed a fundamental lack of empathy with people living in poverty, alongside a lack of positive cultural referents of people who are doing all they can for their families yet still struggling to make ends meet.

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The research also revealed that people generally have very little understanding of the ways in which material hardship impacts on the lives of children and parents, and its ramifications for their psychological and physical health and well-being. Thus, alongside widespread scepticism about the existence of income poverty, participants were strongly inclined to blame child poverty on deficiencies in parent's personal behaviour and viewed 'poor' parents as selfish, wasteful and neglectful, to the detriment of their children's life chances.

The tendency to blame poverty on deficiencies in personal behaviour is not wholly surprising, given the prevalence of negative stereotypes in the media. But the size of the gap between popular perceptions and the reality of life in poverty is nevertheless profoundly depressing – and difficult territory from which to start to put together a compelling public case for tackling poverty. It is therefore important that the Fabian Commission/MORI research not only investigated people's existing attitudes and beliefs about poverty, but examined how they responded to evidence of the reality of life in poverty. Using a deliberative format, it explored the kinds of information and arguments that could be persuasive in changing people's minds about the existence and seriousness of the problem.

Mobilising public support

As we might expect, technical definitions of relative income poverty tended to confuse rather than clarify the issue. A poverty line of 60 per cent of median income was seen as setting an arbitrary figure and ultimately failed to convey any sense of what it means for people to live below that line or whether income above the poverty line offers an adequate standard of living.

Although not unexpected, resistance to a definition of relative income poverty was significant as it tended to affect people's reaction to statistical evidence of the Government's progress in tackling poverty. Where people remained unconvinced by the measure of poverty being used, they were not persuaded by statistical data (presented in a variety of graphical forms) showing the reduction over time in the number of children living below the poverty line. Until people's doubts are assuaged about the existence of poverty, in other words, they are unlikely to believe claims that poverty has decreased or increased over time.

Of course, there is wide recognition that differences pertain between what economists mean by poverty and how the rest of us understand

the term – which has prompted social scientists to develop an alternative set of measures. Deploying evidence of the real daily outcome of chronic and persistent poverty, based on measures of hardship and deprivation, proved to be more compelling and more powerful in convincing initially sceptical people of the reality of poverty than apparently arbitrary, technical definitions. Measures of hardship appear to be more powerful because they provide something that people can relate to, even those who have no direct experience of poverty themselves.

The value of surveys, like *Breadline Britain*, which use public opinion as a benchmark for what every family needs, is that they allow for the development of publicly credible measures of poverty. A case is sometimes made, however, for restricting the list of items included in a definition of hardship to the most basic essentials, since a wider set of measures (items such as the affordability of leisure equipment and activities – having a bicycle or going swimming once a month) do not have the same 'moral force' as children going without basic necessities such as food and clothes.⁶ Contrary to this view, an interesting aspect of our findings was that a wider list *does* have public credibility: specific items had a different emotional impact for different participants. For some in the deliberative workshop it was precisely the evidence of exclusion from wider social participation like swimming that had greatest impact.

However, although it was possible to elicit a strong emotional reaction to evidence of the hardship suffered by children in poverty, we saw little sign of people shifting their views of the underlying causes of poverty. It seems that people who themselves have no direct experience of poverty can be moved to feel sympathy and concern for the situation of children in poverty, but still tend to blame parents for their plight.

There is, then, a particular need to promote a wider understanding of the reality of life in poverty and to combat the stereotypes of the poor that sap public support. It is also important to demonstrate how good parenting alone is often not enough to overcome the hurdles poverty places in the path of children. As Michael Rutter famously expressed it:

Good parenting requires certain permitting circumstances. There must be the necessary life opportunities and facilities. Where these are lacking even the best parents may find it difficult to exercise their skills.⁷

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People generally have very little understanding of the ways in which material hardship impacts on the lives of children and parents

Participants were also asked about their attitudes towards focusing public services on the disadvantaged. The general view here was that they would not accept any worsening of their own services as the price of improving services for others. What they would accept was slower improvement in their own services if this enabled faster progress for the disadvantaged. In other words, our participants were prepared to see public services used to *level up* inequalities – but were not prepared to see a deterioration of their own services as a result of *levelling down*.

Promoting a political agenda for more equal life chances

What lessons can be learned from the research about making a public case for tackling poverty? First, mobilising support for the Government's anti-poverty strategy obviously means persuading a generally sceptical public of the existence of a problem. People are unlikely to be impressed by claims that the Government has been successful in tackling poverty if they are yet to be convinced of the reality of poverty in this country. Second, it is clearly essential to combat myths and misperceptions about people in the lowest income groups by portraying the reality of life in poverty. Stereotypes need to be tackled head-on, with particular attention paid to the way that 'poor' people are portrayed in the media. It also follows that the research has implications for the kind of language politicians themselves employ. A fine line must be tread between respecting people's understandable sense of fairness and reciprocity, on the one hand, and pandering to stereotypes, on the other – especially given what we have seen about the prevalence of those stereotypes.

Finally, mobilising support for an anti-poverty agenda means building a political coalition behind the issue. It is important to recognise here the limits to the appeal of a campaign based solely around the issue of poverty. To build and sustain support for policies that address poverty, the concept of 'poverty' must be aligned to a wider set of social justice issues, as part of a deliberate strategy of building a wider base of support. Leading figures within Government have grasped the need for a broad coalition, though they have tended to attempt the task by marrying the concept with that of social mobility. Helping the poorest in society may well be too narrow a platform upon which to build a viable coalition, but relying on the concept of social mobility is problematic; its individualistic connotations are at a disjuncture with the issue of poverty.

Instead of espousing the value of social mobility, it will be more helpful, we argue, to forge a political coalition around the framework of 'life chances'. A public case needs to be made for investment in policies to help improve the life chances of all children and to narrow the gap in life chances between children from the most affluent and most deprived backgrounds. As we have seen, people *are* prepared to see greater investment in the services of the poorest members of the community, providing that their own services continue to improve, albeit at a slower rate. Anti-poverty campaigners need to give people reasons to support investment to promote more equal life chances which appeal both to moral arguments and to a sense of enlightened self-interest. Crucially, the life chances framework has the potential to do both, since it is a striking feature of modern Britain that inequalities in life chances exist across the social gradient, providing a unifying discourse for people in lower and middle income groups alike. ■

For more information on the Fabian Commission on Life Chances and Child Poverty, go to www.fabian-society.org.uk/press_office/news_latest_all.asp?pressid=431

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- 1 For example, a consistently high proportion of the British electorate say the gap between high and low incomes is too large. In the *British Social Attitudes Survey*, the proportion of respondents who say this gap is too large rose from 72 per cent in 1983 to a peak of 85 per cent in 1994, while it now lies at 82 per cent. In addition, support for the idea that taxes and spending on welfare should be higher more than doubled from 32 per cent in 1983 to 65 per cent in 1991, and has remained strong ever since.
- 2 Making explicit the consequences of general principles or statements of support for the level of taxation that people pay sharply reduces people's willingness to support increases in public spending. Prior to being told about the consequence of their choices for taxation, respondents in the *British Social Attitudes Survey* either underestimated the true tax cost to them of their spending choices, or assumed that the tax consequences of extra spending would fall on someone else.
- 3 R Lister, 'New Labour: a study in ambiguity from a position of ambivalence', *Critical Social Policy*, 21(4), 2001, pp425-47
- 4 The deliberative research consisted of two group discussions, a three-hour extended focus group (9 participants) and a full day (six-hour) workshop (21 participants). All were recruited by telephone with a pre-agreed set of demographic parameters. In both sessions, a representative sample was recruited on the basis of gender, BME status, and age/lifestage within the range 25–45 years (focus group) and 25–65 years (workshop). All participants were drawn from socio-economic classes B, C1 and C2. Their professional sectors included teaching, insurance, social work, banking, and leisure. For practical reasons, all were recruited from London and the South East of England.
- 5 P Beresford, D Green, R Lister and K Woodard, *Poverty first hand: Poor people speak for themselves*, CPAG, 1999
- 6 A Marsh, 'Ending child poverty: Inaugural lecture by Alan Marsh', University of Westminster, 10 March 2004, www.psi.org.uk/docs/2004/alanmarsh.pdf
- 7 M Rutter, 'Dimensions of parenthood: some myths and some suggestions', in Department of Health and Social Security, *The Family in Society: Dimensions of Parenthood*, HMSO, 1974